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Testing the Soviet Reality

IDEOLOGY AND POWER IN SOVIET POLITICS

By Zbigniew K. Brzezinski
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ALTHOUGH the five essays contained in this collection were written separately over the course of a number of years, they form a remarkably cohesive whole. Their unifying theme is, as the title indicates, the interrelationship of power and ideology in Soviet politics. The author, Director of Columbia University's Research Institute on Communist Affairs, poses two basic questions, which might be phrased as follows: What distinctive features has their ideology given to the Soviet rulers' pursuit of power? And has the pursuit of power led the Soviet leaders into contact with realities sufficiently resistant to ideologically inspired action to set in motion a process of ideological erosion?

The main outlines of Brzezinski's approach to these two questions can be stated rather simply, though it is by no means a simple approach. He contends that their ideology has involved the Soviet rulers in a quest for total power and led them to attempt to overcome all restraints on their power, whether derived from the independence of institutions, the autonomy of voluntary associations, or even the privacy of primary groups such as the family. This quest for total power is, he argues, historically unprecedented (though in the contemporary period it has animated the Nazis, Fascists and Chinese Communists as well as

the Bolsheviks), and must not be viewed merely as a product of modern technology harnessed to traditional autocratic ambition.

The traditional autocrats, including the Russian Tsars, recognized the legitimacy of at least some limits on their power. The Soviet rulers, according to Brzezinski, are prepared to recognize no limits as legitimate. Nor have they been forced to do so. They have not achieved the sort of total power that they seek, but at the same time, the obstacles they have encountered up to the present day have not been so great as to compel them to abandon their quest or to erode the ideological zeal behind it.

The most nearly insurmountable obstacles which the Soviet leadership has faced are in the area of international affairs. Prior to World War II, the Soviet rulers were largely powerless to force developments outside their immediate domain to conform to ideological expectations, and the "spontaneous" course of developments was such as to compel them to undertake major ideological revisions. These revisions, however, neither transformed the ideology into a mere faith irrelevant to policy, nor did they result in serious ideological erosion.

In the first place, despite the "obduracy" of the external environment, international developments were not wholly incongruent with ideological expectations. Second, the very fact of relative Soviet powerlessness on the world stage served to make international developments less ideologically relevant, since the ideology itself does not postulate confirmation through "spontaneity" but only through "consciousness"—i.e., through purposeful action, which, in the circumstances, was almost impossible. Third, domestic "successes" made it relatively easy for the Soviet rulers to ignore and rationalize foreign policy "failures."

And, at home, according to

Brzezinski, "successes" predominated. Reality was made to conform to ideological expectations through the application of purposeful (and violent) action. Through such policies as collectivization and rapid industrialization and the terror which accompanied them, the Soviet rulers were able to overcome almost all limits on their power and achieve the "institutionalization of revolutionary zeal" which they sought, thus reinforcing ideological commitment and buttressing it with institutional loyalties.

Looking to the future, Brzezinski sees the potentially greatest domestic challenge to the aspirations of the Soviet rulers in the process of industrial maturation. He recognizes that this process has led to terror becoming increasingly costly in economic terms and has created a managerial elite which is technocratically oriented and inclined to be restive at all-pervasive political control and perpetual mobilization. He acknowledges, too, that the same process has tended to infuse the status hierarchy inherent in modern production with "class content" and hence to generate patterns of social solidarity and antagonism which are not wholly amenable to controlled manipulation.

But Brzezinski forcefully rejects the predictions of such men as Isaac Deutscher that industrial maturation will lead to political democracy. He attacks the notion that a technocratic orientation inevitably leads to demands for political liberty or even for a meaningful voice in political decision-making, citing Nazi Germany as evidence. He then goes on to suggest that a rigid system of social stratification does not automatically give rise to social pluralism and pressures for the toleration of diversity. Finally, he argues that the relegation of terror to the background is no guarantee of liberty; once the job of uprooting traditional loyalties and behavior patterns is well launched, and once totalitarian indoctrination and edu-